

Document phenomenology: a framework for holistic analysis

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Do documents exist? Or, perhaps more to the point: how do documents exist?

Questions about existence are, of course, not unique to documents, as evidenced by the sprawling literature in ontological philosophy. Yet, as Heidegger (1927/2010) pointed out, most of this inquiry assumes existence as a *fait accompli* and is more interested in questions regarding, for instance, classification. In Heidegger's terms, traditional ontology asks questions about beings, not about being.

With documents, assuming existence as self-evident – failing to ask about being – raises a host of issues. If a document is taken to be anything that furnishes evidence or proof of something (Buckland, 1997), how is it that objects become documents? And why do some things become documents while others do not? How can we account for, to give Meyriat's (1981) example, Napoleon's letters, which furnished one sort of proof in the days of their progenitor but today furnish a different one altogether? Academic interest in documents has mostly sidestepped these questions, but the emerging neo-documentalist tradition (see Lund and Buckland, 2009) offers the opportunity to explore documental being and becoming.

As reviewed by Lund (2009), document scholars historically focused on the material aspects of documents; more recently, the academic focus has turned toward the social and perceptual aspects of documents. In this latter vein it is, by now, well accepted that documents only exist in the presence of a human actor. For instance, Meyriat (1981) described the document as:

[...] not inherent, but rather the product of will, either to inform or to be informed – the second, at least, being always necessary. If this will doesn't garner a response from the beholder, the information remains only potential. The object on which the information is written or inscribed is not yet a document. It becomes one when a question is asked of it and its information is activated (p. 54, translation ours).

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